

AB-12C - Symposium**UNDERSTANDING WOMEN'S PROPENSITY:  
PERSPECTIVES FROM IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS**Mary Achatz  
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**Introduction**

The Youth Attitude Tracking Study (YATS) follow-up interviews of young women were conducted to enhance our understanding of enlistment propensity. These interviews followed a research protocol that asked the young women about their career and life plans, particularly those related to enlistment propensity. Other areas addressed by the protocol included current and prior enlistment propensity and reasons for any changes between the two, images of life in the military, sources of information about opportunities for women in the military, and perceptions of women's roles and opportunities in the Armed Forces. The in-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured, open-ended manner that allowed the young women to respond in their own words. This approach provided insight into what the young women think is important, and the ways that events in one life domain affect, or are related to, enlistment propensity.

This paper summarizes the results of this study as they relate to enlistment propensity. It begins with a brief overview of the YATS in-depth interview project, followed by portraits of young women from each of four propensity groups. These portraits provide a feel for the depth and richness of the information gathered from the in-depth interviews. Next, overall summaries of findings from analysis of young women in the four propensity groups are presented. The paper concludes with a presentation of young women's perceptions of gender issues in the military and what could be done to make the military a more attractive career option for young women.

**Project Overview**

A total of 96 interviews were conducted with 17-21 year-old female YATS respondents who were high school seniors or graduates. The interviews were conducted over the telephone from January 1998 through March 1998. The sample was stratified by enlistment propensity group and race/ethnicity to assure representation of these important segments of the population. Approximately equal numbers of black, Hispanic, and white women were interviewed.

For participant selection, the young women were categorized into four propensity groups based on YATS interview responses. The groups formed were termed Joiners, Non-Joiners, Shifters, and Fence-Sitters. Young women assigned to the Joiner propensity group were those who indicated they had given serious consideration to the military and, when asked to describe their future plans, mentioned military service. Non-Joiners were those who had given very little or no

consideration to joining the military and consistently reported they would "probably not" or "definitely not" be on active duty in the military or any of the Services in the next few years. Shifters are those who said they had previously considered enlistment in the past, but were no longer considering it. These young women did not provide an "unaided" mention of military service among their future plans and consistently said they would "probably not" or "definitely not" be on active duty in the military or any of the Services in the next few years. Fence Sitters fell somewhere between Joiners and Non-Joiners. These young women indicated they had given some thought to joining the military in the past, but responded tentatively to questions about whether or not they expected to join in the next few years. Approximately equal numbers of young women in each propensity group were selected for the in-depth interviews.

The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and followed a semi-structured protocol that explored young women's career and life plans, processes for decision making, and sources of inspiration or influence for following particular military or nonmilitary paths. The interviews were conducted by experienced researchers who were familiar with the goals of the study and trained to conduct the interview in a manner that allowed the young women to structure their responses in ways that were meaningful to them and, at the same time, addressed all the topics and issues included in the protocol. This approach allowed the young women to tell their own stories in their own words.

#### **Individual Profiles—Joiners, Non-Joiners, Shifters, and Fence Sitters**

Transcripts of each in-depth interview provided the raw data that were used for analysis. Each transcript provided verbatim accounts of the unique life circumstances, aspirations and challenges of individuals. Through analysis of these accounts, however, there emerged distinct clusters of young women who were confronting similar challenges and were heading in particular directions. The following profiles provide a glimpse into the lives and minds of four young women—a Joiner, Non-Joiner, Shifter, and Fence Sitter, respectively.

**Maria—A Joiner.** Maria is a 17-year-old Mexican American woman who lives with her father and mother in a small town in eastern Texas. Her father is a former Marine and many of her close relatives are either serving or have served in one of the Armed Services. Maria is a senior in high school and a member of her school's cross country and power lifting teams. Maria has a good sense of her skills and how she would like to develop and apply them in what she refers to as "the real world." Her plan is to become a career officer in the military, with a specialization in computer science—a field that is consistent with her own interests and talents, as well as the needs of the military. Although she received considerable support from her father and other relatives for pursuing this path, the ultimate decision was her own. In her words: "I pretty much know what I want to be. I want to go into the military...after I get a degree and then go in as an officer, instead of going straight to the military. I know people who have done that and it's really worked out for

them. They've talked to me about it and said it's a good idea. Since I was little I've always had good grades and people have influenced me to do this and do that and I finally figured out what I really want to do."

Maria will be the first person in her family to attend college. However, she is not going in blindly. On her own, she has explored various career options by talking to family friends, teachers and professionals about their jobs in the civilian and military sectors. When asked how she approaches these conversations, she said: "I ask for a description of the job and what exactly they do... I ask them for a demonstration and stuff like that... I have to know what it's like. If I'm not going to like it why would I go into it?"

Maria has been accepted to the college of her choice and has already talked to a campus recruiter for the Air Force ROTC program. Her father told her that ROTC is "good for discipline" and would help him finance her education, though she has since been awarded a generous scholarship. She thinks she will experience greater satisfaction from a career in the military because she would "actually be doing something to help the country."

**Naomi—A Non-Joiner.** Naomi is a white college-bound high school senior from a poor working class family. She is goal-oriented and has a good sense about where she wants to head in life: "There's nobody else that can make a better decision than you because it's what you're going to want to do, not what somebody else wants." Her goal is to put herself through six years of college to get a Masters degree in Social Work. She knows this will be costly and, because her family is not well off, she has decided to start out at a local two-year college and then transfer to a university. Already, she works at two part-time jobs and knows that she will have to continue working throughout college. In her words: "Otherwise there's no way I'm going to be able to afford it. Nobody's helping me out but myself... I picked out a community college for a couple of years just because I'm not going to be able to afford to go to a good college for a whole four years." She plans to maintain a 3.0 grade point average because it will qualify her for a tuition reduction program when she transfers to a state university.

At one time, Naomi thought about joining the military "just because of the paying for college." She read pamphlets, but was wary of believing what they said. In her words: "You can't really just go by a pamphlet... they're not going to make themselves sound bad." Recruiters came to her school, but she said their visits were not well-publicized and she never talked to one. Family and friends who had served did not encourage her to join. They told her the military makes promises they do not keep and, from this advice, she surmised: "If my main reason for joining is for college money and it doesn't happen, then what would be the point of going?" She thinks the military is best suited to those who do not know what else to do with their lives, since "there are a lot of careers that can happen through [the military]."

Her parents definitely discouraged consideration of the military because she is a woman and "women are treated badly in the military." She agrees that the military is a hostile environment for women: "It's a lot of pressure on [women]... not so

much physically, but as in if you're being treated poorly you're not going to be happy in the environment you're in... I'm talking about being treated rudely... I'm not even talking about taking orders from somebody... because you do that your whole life" whether you are in the military or not. The military, she concluded, is much easier for males—not because women do not do as well, but because "a lot of people just still don't think that a woman could do as good."

**Melanie—A Shifter.** Lena is a 20-year-old white single mother from a small Tennessee town. She worries that unless she develops some marketable skills, she will be doomed to work in fast food forever. At the suggestion of her social services worker, she is thinking about enrolling in classes to become a Licensed Practical Nurse. Lena lives with her parents, who can watch her 10-month-old son when she is at class.

When she was growing up, Lena dreamed that one day she would join the Air Force. Her grandfather, who had served in the Air Force, was her inspiration. One year he gave her flying lessons at a local private airport for Christmas and, from that time forward, she wanted to join the Air Force so that she could fly airplanes like her grandfather did. This set her apart from her friends, she said, who only saw enlistment as an escape from "this little country hole we live in." Her father supported her dream, but her mother said it was no life for a girl.

In high school Lena joined Junior ROTC and during her senior year spent a week at a local Army base, which she enjoyed tremendously. She thought the base instructor gave her and her classmates a realistic picture of what military life would be like. Also, they practiced rappelling, learned how to read maps, and walked across monkey bridges. She said she was not in the best of shape, but thought she could meet the physical requirements. However, she was less certain that she could adjust to the discipline. As she put it: "I can handle someone telling me what to do up to a point, and then I just start getting mad. If they're not on my back all the time, just let me figure it out on my own, I think I could handle it pretty good."

Also in high school, she talked with recruiters from the Army and Air Force. The Army recruiter impressed her the most. He met with her at her parents' home. He was informative and impressed her as someone who really enjoyed his job. She was seriously disappointed by the Air Force recruiter who she said appeared "only interested in talking to the guys." She explained: "The Air Force recruiter didn't really seem all that concerned. It wasn't like he was trying to recruit me, I guess because I was a woman... I called his office a couple times and left messages for him to call me... He never did."

After high school, she became pregnant. However, her interest in joining the military continued. After her baby was born, an Army recruiter called her. When she told him about the baby, he informed her that the Army does not accept unmarried women with children. The National Guard, she said, was the only branch of Service that would accept her, unless she got married. However, this was not a satisfactory alternative to her. In her words: "I didn't want to be a weekend warrior... I don't think you really get the full effect of what military life is... And if



**you're going to join the Armed Forces, you shouldn't just do it once a month. You ought to live it and breathe it."**

**Lea—A Fence Sitter.** Lea is an independent 19-year-old African American woman. She lives on her own in a medium-sized southern city. She works full-time at a pizza shop and likes to spend her free time playing basketball or softball. She plans to begin college as soon as her application for financial aid is approved. She is not sure whether she wants to pursue a career as a nurse or physical therapist, but thinks that she can take the basic courses and decide later. What she knows for sure is that she does not want to be "stuck in a \$6.25 an hour job." Her mother strongly supports her decision to go to college and advises her to complete her education before starting a family. "Children are the last thing on my mind. My mom always tells me... get all your college away and then have the kids. Not like her.. She had us and she just went back to college [last year]."

A year ago she was certain she would join the Air Force. However, on the day that she was scheduled to take the ASVAB, the recruiter did not show up and did not return her calls. It was not until after she had committed to a lease for an apartment that the recruiter called to reschedule her appointment to take the test. She said she could not get out of her lease, and thoughts of joining the Air Force receded. At the time of the in-depth interview, she said the military was still an option, though she does not plan to pursue it again until after she graduates from college.

In her opinion, basic training may be the only component of the military in which men may have an advantage over women. "A guy might be more likely to get through it... because they are always exercising and staying in shape... Females go to the mall." However, she plays sports and does not think the physical demands would be an obstacle for her. She thinks women and men have similar opportunities to get ahead in the military. She has a female cousin in the Navy who has advanced in rank through determination and hard work. Like her cousin, she described herself as "one who doesn't give up and succeeds at whatever she attempts." She thinks the military could do more to educate young women about the opportunities available. "This would give women more confidence about going into the military... Help them to see it's not a one-sided place to be."

### **Group Profiles: Joiners, Non-Joiners, Shifters, and Fence Sitters**

The preceding portraits of individuals from the four propensity groups provide examples of the diverse life circumstances and considerations that affect women's military propensity.

**Joiners.** The Joiners in our sample fall into two main demographic groups. The majority of blacks and whites are from predominately middle class homes, while the majority of Hispanics are from less well-to-do working class homes. Compared to young women in the other groups, a disproportionate number of Joiners grew up in military families or reported strong familial ties to the military. Many also participated in their high schools' junior ROTC programs. As a result of these

associations, Joiners have relatively clear and realistic images of the rewards and challenges of military life.

Most Joiners have put considerable thought into what they would like to do before they graduated from high school. As a group, they tend to be goal-oriented and, compared to those in the Shifter and Fence Sitter groups, have a relatively clear sense of their career interests, strengths and aspirations. Many are oriented toward going to college and aspire to enter the military as officers. Marriage and children are distant goals.

Most Joiners are motivated by the military's provision of education and training benefits, steady jobs and a secure source of income. Very few young women—all Hispanic—mentioned that they were motivated by patriotism. Most Joiners think women and men have similar opportunities in the military. Assignments and promotions are based on hard work and skills, not gender. Many also believe that gender discrimination is greater in the civilian workforce due to weak systems for accountability and lax enforcement of the law.

**Non-Joiners.** Non-Joiners are a diverse group. Many grew up in families that had stressed the importance of higher education for as long as they could remember. As a result, the largest single cluster of young women in this propensity group were either college-bound high school seniors or already attending college. Some were from middle income families. Others were from lower income families whose parents wanted them to go to college and have better lives than what they had.

Most college-oriented Non-Joiners spent two or more years thinking about what they were going to do after high school. Like Joiners, they tend to be goal-oriented and, compared to Fence Sitters and Shifters, have a relatively clear sense of their career interests, strengths, and aspirations. A common theme was their desire to remain close to their families and homes after high school. For some, this narrowed the field in terms of which colleges they would attend. Marriage and children are distant goals and are subordinate to their career goals.

In general, Non-Joiners have little information about the military. They did not think the military was a viable option for themselves—in part, due to the male orientation of recruiter ads and news coverage. Many believe that men are given more privileges and respect in the military than women. A very small number were aware that recruiters came to their schools and a few surmised that because they were college-prep they were out of the loop. Those who had discussed it with family or friends received negative messages about military life. Nevertheless, they thought the military was a good option for other young people, particularly those who did not know what else they might do with their lives.

Compared to young women in the other propensity groups, Non-Joiners were more likely to associate the military with "killing and dying." Several mentioned that enlistment was never an option due to conflicts between their religious beliefs and the military. Also, in contrast to other groups, more Non-Joiners said their personalities were not well suited for the structure and discipline of military life.

**Shifters.** The largest single cluster of Shifters is composed of young women who are no longer thinking about joining the military because they have formed families or expect to in the near future. Within and across race and ethnic groups, about half of the young women in this propensity group either had a child or were expecting a child. A few of these young mothers were married, but most were not. Several others were married, but neither pregnant nor parenting. A smaller cluster of young women in this propensity group decided against the military primarily because they did not want to leave the comfort and security of their hometowns. Several others were highly motivated to join the military, but had health conditions that disqualified them.

Many Shifters have at least one family member who was currently serving in the military or had served in the past. Compared to Joiners, however, these familial ties to the military tend to be weak. Some mentioned that family members actively discouraged them when they were considering the military. Also compared to Joiners, Shifters have a more jaundiced view of the way women are treated in the military. Overall, they believe that men are treated as superiors and women as inferiors. For most, however, sexual harassment is not any worse in the military than it is in the civilian workforce and, therefore, was not an important factor in their decision to not join the military.

Another common fret among the Shifters is the level of commitment required by the military. Unlike commitments made to employers in the civilian sector, commitments to the military are irrevocable. If they were to enlist, they would be "stuck" for the full-term of their contract whether they loved it or hated it. For some, this possibility was a major factor in their decision not to join the military.

**Fence Sitters.** The largest cluster of young women in this propensity group would like to further their education after high school, but are concerned because their families do not have sufficient resources to pay for it. Some of these young women are attracted to the military, at least in part, because it provides skills training and a steady job. Others consider it a back-up or last resort if other means for financing their education or training after high school are not available. A smaller cluster of Fence Sitters did not have any specific plans for the future and did not seem to have sufficient information or motivation to pursue either college or the military. Further, they did not appear to have access to adults who could effectively guide them.

In general, Fence Sitters did not grow up in families with strong ties to the military. None participated in high school ROTC programs and only a few reported they knew anyone who was currently serving in the military or had served in the past. Also, most had little or no contact with recruiters. Those who did described them as persuasive, but not trustworthy.

### **Conclusion: Young Women's Suggestions for Recruitment**

Included in the interview protocol was the question: "What, if anything, could be

**done to make the military more attractive to young women like yourself?"**

**Frequently mentioned responses suggested the need for more information about the roles of women in the military and the opportunities available to them; more print and other media advertisements that portray women serving their country; and increasing the number and visibility of female recruiters.**



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